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TOLSTOY'S LETTERS TO HIS WIFE

BY DAVID A. MODEL

WHEN Tolstoy died under such dramatic circumstances a few years ago, the dominant note in much of the comment on his life—aside, of course, from the inevitable allusions to his too obvious dualism—was censure of his wife for having hindered the complete realization of the great Russian's ethical and social ideals. It was insinuated, when not openly charged, that by imposing on him a life of ease and luxury repugnant to his tastes and inconsistent with his philosophy, she drove him, finally, to the sensational flight which culminated in his sudden death. This undercurrent of reproach has increased rather than diminished from year to year, to the great and natural mortification of the widowed Countess. In self-defense, therefore, and for fear that after her own (she says approaching) death people will continue to misconstrue her and Tolstoy's mutual relations, she has had published recently all his letters to her—"all," she assures us, "except three that concern people still living, and the last six, for which the time has not yet come."

Whatever vindication these letters may bring to Tolstoy's widow in the open court before which she has confidently submitted her case, they are far more valuable for the new light they shed on Tolstoy himself. For these letters reveal a side of the great man which, if always suspected, was never generally understood: Tolstoy as an ardent lover and affectionate husband, which rounds out wonderfully his multiple personality.

Tolstoy's married life, taken all in all, was not a happy one; and there were forty-eight long years of it. The inner struggle between Tolstoy the artist and Tolstoy the moralist, of which his biographers persistently remind us, was as nothing compared to the half-century of struggle between Tolstoy the spiritual reformer and Tolstoy the tender husband. Even

the few extracts here made from his new letters tell a romantic story unsurpassed in tragic intensity by all the Romeos and Juliets ever conceived by the mind of man. The letters themselves—six hundred and fifty-six in all—fill a large volume and add a most valuable chapter to Tolstoy's autobiography. Their great psychological significance is obvious, for in them we get the heart and soul—feel the very pulse—of a great and true love, with all its trials and tribulations.

For the brief study we are here to make of these letters the chronological order is, of course, the best. To afford a better perspective, I preface the extracts of Tolstoy's letters to his wife with three from his friendly letters to his aunt, Countess Alexandra Andréevna Tolstoy, which give us the very first impressions of his new and intoxicating romantic experience.

(September, 1862.) Dear, kind friend Alexandrine: On Sunday, September 23rd, I am to marry Sophia Behrs, daughter of my childhood friend L. I. To give you an idea of what she is, one would have to write volumes; I have never been so happy since I was born.

(September 28.) I have reached the age of thirty-four without knowing that one can love so and be so happy. When I am more tranquil I will write you a long letter; I don't mean more tranquil, exactly—I am more tranquil now than I have been in all my life—but when I have grown more accustomed to my new state. At present I always feel as if I have stolen some undeserved, illegitimate happiness not intended for me. And why am I loved by such good people like you and—stranger still—by a being like my wife?

(Autumn of 1863.) Who and what am I now, you will probably ask yourself. I am a husband and a father, fully satisfied with my condition and so used to it that, in order to realize my happiness, I must imagine what life would be without it. . . . I have never known my intellectual and even moral powers to be so free and so fit for work.

Tolstoy was still in such high romantic spirits a year later, when the first letters to his wife were written:

(August 9, 1864.) You say I'll forget you. Not for a minute, especially in company. While hunting I may forget, mindful only of the chase; but when among people, with every meeting, every word, I recall you and always want to say to you what I can say to no one else.

(November 24.) I don't think I could fall asleep without having written you. Whatever I do during the day, I think, "I shall write about it to Sonia."

(December 1.) If it wasn't for this writing, I feel I absolutely could not be one day without you.

(The same day.) How happy, it seems, I should now be with you; yet when I return we shall probably quarrel about some trifle. . . . Good-by, my dear friend. How I love and kiss you. All will be well and we shall know no unhappiness, if you will but love me as I love you.

The last sentence is very significant. It occurs again and again in these letters, with hardly any variation, and shows that Tolstoy was a most passionate—even a jealous—husband. Even while he was still courting the young lady he wrote her: “If as a husband I am not to be loved as I love, it will be terrible.” That this intense affection was not fully returned by his wife appears from Tolstoy’s repeated reproaches and insinuations:

(December 7–10, 1864.) Your ill-humored letter reached me to-day, but even this gladdens and calms me! At a distance I love you even so, and near too. I cannot imagine you otherwise than in your changing moods of gaiety and tenderness, and sometimes in the mood in which you wrote this letter, which seldom comes upon you and which I always ascribe to physical causes—doing which, however, always makes you angry with me. But such is your mood when you suddenly grow jealous, as happened, you will remember, shortly before my departure.

. . . All the brunettes in your family are very amiable and sympathetic. The love of Alexandrovna [Tolstoy’s mother-in-law] strikingly resembles yours. Even your bad traits are alike. I sometimes hear how she confidently starts talking of what she is ignorant, making positive assertions and exaggerations—and I recognize you. But I like you, any way. Sonia, my dear! How wise you are in everything you wish to put your mind to. It is because of this I say that you are [merely] indifferent to intellectual interests, and that not only is there no incapacity in you, but you have a mind—and a great mind [for them]. And this have all the dark-complexioned Behrs, whom I especially like. . . . I do and do not like you when you imitate her [Tolstoy’s above-mentioned aunt]. I would like you to be really as good as she is; but wish you to be (as indeed you are) made of finer clay and with greater intellectual interests. And so you are.

Having so delicately stated what appears to have been one great gap between husband and wife—a statement sympathetically retracted, however, as soon as made, Tolstoy concludes this long letter as follows:

I have another trouble: I am losing ardor for my writing, and imagine, you, the fool, with your non-intellectual interests, told me the actual truth [about *War and Peace*, on which Tolstoy was then engaged]. As a good wife, you thought about your husband as about your own self; and I remember your telling me that my military and historical [portions], in which I try so hard, will turn out poorly, while the other—the domestic [pictures], the characters, and the psychological [elements]—will be good. Nothing could be truer. And I remember how you said it, and remember all of you. And, like Tania [Countess Tolstoy’s sister], I feel like exclaiming: “Mamma, I want to go to Yasnaya Polyana; I want Sophia!” I began writing you out of mood, and end an entirely different man. My darling! Only love me as I love you, and nothing else matters, and all’s well.

That Tolstoy took his early matrimonial experience very

moodily will already have been seen. His general feelings at this time, after two and a half years of married life, are best inferred from a note addressed to his aunt in which he wrote, among other things, this:

You will remember, I wrote you once that people err when they expect a kind of happiness unalloyed with trials, illusions, and woe, when everything runs evenly and blissfully. I was mistaken then. Such happiness does exist, and I am living in it the third year, and with every day it becomes deeper and better poised.

Yet, six months later, he wrote his wife reproachfully and apologetically: "We never before parted so coldly as this time, and therefore my conscience bothers me all the time." The following are in all his variable moods:

(Spring of 1866.) If it be possible to return sooner, I shall, for only with you, the children, and at home am I a man.

(September 27.) . . . But what especially cheered me up are your letters, the fact that *you* are in them. And you put the best of yourself into your letters and thoughts about me. In actual life I know this is lost amid cares and quarrelsomeness.

(November 16.) I feel that you were tired and out of mood when writing this letter. But even in bad moods you are dearer than all the world to me.

(June 20, 1867.) I have just read your letter, and cannot describe to you all the affection—tearful affection—I feel for you; and not only now, but every minute of the day. My darling, my angel, and best in the world! For God's sake, don't stop writing me every day. . . . Without you I am not sad exactly—although this, too, at times—but, worst of all, I am a dead man. So much do I love you in your absence—even to foolishness.

(Autumn.) Outside of intellectual needs, nothing in the world can interest me and distract my thoughts from you and home. The theater showed me this yesterday. I left it for grief, in the middle of a new play, and one that was well acted.

(Without date, 1869.) On this journey I realized for the first time to what extent I have become attached to you and the children. I can remain alone *while* constantly at work, as I am in Moscow, but the moment I am disengaged I feel that I absolutely cannot stay alone.

(July 16, 1871.) With every day's absence, I think of you more intensely, anxiously, and passionately; and I feel more depressed. . . . just now I feel like crying, so much do I love you.

(July 13, 1872.) To work without you, without knowing that you are here, seems impossible.

(January of 1877.) I try not to think of you in your absence. Yesterday I approached your table, and, like one scalded, jumped away to avoid visualizing you. The same at night; I do not look in your direction.

(June of 1878.) I like this feeling of an unusual, a most spiritual love I bear you, which I feel more intensely in separation.

Three years later, while Tolstoy was in Caucasia undergoing koumys treatment, his wife wrote him complainingly

of his neglect and even indifference. This called forth the following reply:

(August 2, 1881.) You won't believe how it troubles me that you are probably overtaxing your strength and how I repent having given you so little help [with the family]. In this respect the kourmys has done me good; it has brought me down from the point of view from which, carried away by my work, I perforce viewed everything. I now see things differently. I still think and feel the same, but am cured of the delusion that others must view everything as I do. I was very guilty before you, dearest, unconsciously and unintentionally guilty, you know, but guilty none the less. My excuse is that, in order to work with such concentration as has been my wont and accomplish anything, one must forget everything else. And I did forget you too much, and repent it.

The following, written from his country home on his return from Moscow, where he had left wife and family, expresses Tolstoy's well-known dislike for city life.

(February 4, 1882.) You, ever at home and absorbed in family cares, cannot feel the difference that city and country make for me. The chief evil of city life for me and all men of thought is that one must either continually argue, refuting fallacious reasoning, or acquiesce in it without argument, which is still worse. And disputing or refuting nonsense and lies is a most idle occupation and a nerve-ending one; since there may be an infinite number of lies. Yet one engages in this and comes to believe it an occupation. But it is sheerest idleness. If one keeps out of disputation, however, he gets some point so clear that it precludes all possibility of dispute. And this can happen only in quietness and solitude.

Then in his amorous vein again:

(March 6.) I cannot live away from you. It is essential to me that all be together. . . . You say: "I love you, but you don't need my love at present." . . . This only do I need, and nothing else can put new life in me. . . . Your love for me is my supreme joy in life.

Tolstoy, quite obviously, is for ever on the defensive; for ever apologizing for something or other that has given the slightest offense to his wife. It is obvious, too, that although his protestations of love are now as sincere as ever, a feeling of intensest sympathy gradually moderates and in the end displaces his earlier love. The next lengthy letter was written in reply to an unusually incisive one from his wife.

(June 15, 1883.) I received your letter, and the longer I read it the more I feel its coldness. There is nothing special in the letter, yet I didn't sleep all night and felt very dejected. I loved you so much, and there you reminded me of everything by which you deliberately kill my love. I wrote you that I took leave of you too coldly and hastily; and to this you reply that you are trying to live so that I may be unnecessary to you. Of me

and of what constitutes my life you write as of some weakness, of which you hope I may be cured by means of koumys. Of our forthcoming meeting, which is for me a bright star ahead, . . . you write with apprehensions as to reproaches and unpleasantness on my part. Of yourself you write that you are so tranquil and contented that it only remains for me not to disturb this tranquillity and contentment by my presence. . . . Oh, if only you did not get these strange spells, I cannot imagine how my love for you would grow! Perhaps it must be so. But if it could be avoided, how good it would be.

I console myself [with the thought] that it was a bad mood which is long past, and now, having spoken out, have put the matter out of my mind. But still it is far from the feelings I had toward you before your last letter. Yes, that was too strong. But enough of this. Excuse me if I have pained you, for you know that there can be no dissembling between us.

Tolstoy then really felt, as did the Countess, that a turning-point in their relations had been reached. He wrote her thus:

(September 29, 1883.) . . . Of late—I cannot say since when—you have become especially dear and interesting to me—and dear in every way. It seems to me that a new tie has grown between us, and I am most fearful lest it break.

(October 28, 1884.) Why don't you write that you are lonesome without me and call me? This is not as last year. . . . That I need you for the fullness of my life is certain, but one can live also in an incomplete state. But if you are lonesome, tell me and I'll come at once.

The following extracts, from letters written in reply to complaints concerning Tolstoy's well-known indifference to pecuniary and other matters affecting his family, touch the very heart of the issues that divided husband and wife.

(October 29.) I cannot—don't be angry, darling—ascribe any importance whatever to these monetary accounts. These are not events like, for instance, sickness, marriage, birth, death, acquired knowledge, a good or bad act, the good or bad habits of people near and dear to us; but matters of our own making, which we have arranged one way and can rearrange a hundred different ways. I know that this [view] often makes you, and always makes the children, very tired (I think it is all well known); but I cannot help repeating that the happiness or unhappiness of us all cannot depend on whether we spend all or save, but only upon what we ourselves are. Supposing you leave a million to Kostinka [one of Tolstoy's sons], will that make him any happier? In order that this [view] should not appear contemptible, one must take a broader and deeper view of life.

(October, 1885.) Everything shows me that you are very agitated, and this grieves me very much—*i. e.*, I feel for you and am pained. I would like to help you, but you know yourself that I cannot do it and that my saying "I cannot" is no mere excuse. All those matters, or at least most of them, that trouble you—such as the education of the children, their progress, money matters, and even publishers' transactions—all these matters seem to me unnecessary and superfluous. Please don't yield to grief and the

desire to reproach [me], for you know that this is due, not to double-dealing and laziness (in order to avoid effort), but to other reasons, which I do not deem bad ones; therefore, much as I like trying to reform myself, I cannot wish to reform in this respect. If, as you would say, you think I go to extremes, you need only enter into my motives to see that what I am governed by can have no extremes, because if we are to admit of any halting-place on the road to righteousness, it were best not to follow it at all. The nearer one's goal the harder it is to stop and the more intently one runs. For I look upon my life and my family thus and not otherwise, not from whimsicality, but because I came by this view of life in the school of painful experience. . . . I say all this only that you may have no ill-feelings against me, which, I fear, lurk in you. If I am wrong, then please forgive me; if not, eradicate your resentment toward me for remaining here [at Yasnaya Polyana] instead of coming to Moscow. My presence in Moscow, with the family, is well-nigh useless; the conditions of that life have a paralyzing effect on me, while the life itself is very repulsive to me—again owing to my general view of life, which I cannot change—and would greatly hinder my work. . . .

I know one thing: that for my peace of mind, and hence happiness, there must be affectionate relations between us, and therefore this is the first condition. If I find that you miss me, or that the separation from all becomes trying to me and work lags, I will come. And there everything will be seen; be it only in love and harmony.

(December 20.) . . . Again the same: "The task is beyond my strength"; "he never helps"; "I do everything"; "life does not wait" . . . The words are all familiar to me and, what's more, have no bearing whatever upon what I write and say. I said and say one thing: it is necessary that we consider and decide what is right and what is wrong, and which way to go; but so long as this remains unsettled it is not surprising that you suffer yourself and make others suffer. It is idle to talk of the imperative need of immediate action, since for people who have money for rent and food there are no imperative needs—save the need to think things over and live as is best. But, for God's sake, let us never speak of this again. I will not. I hope to be of stronger nerves hereafter and keep quiet. . . . I, at least, cannot change anything, as you know yourself. Only one thing remains: to cultivate tranquillity and kindness, of which I have little; and this I will endeavor to do. Good-by, my darling; I embrace and love and pity you. Love to the children. How lonesome you must be! I must come to you soon.

Thus the breach continued to widen—Tolstoy repeatedly, and without mincing words, stating his philosophical views, and his wife showing no particular eagerness either to understand or to adopt them. He never lost hope, however, of ultimately winning her over, and his letters would become unusually encouraging and sympathetic whenever he thought he saw her coming the least bit his way. Here are three fine specimens, written many years apart.

(March 29, 1889.) . . . Since I cannot help considering the life of the spirit as the main thing, I never cease sympathizing with your spiritual

life, being gladdened by its appearance and saddened by its decline; while always not only hopeful, but sure that it will become more and more intense in you, ridding you of your suffering and bringing that happiness in which you sometimes seem not to believe, but which I always experience, and the more intensely the nearer I come to the end of corporeal existence.

(September 26, 1896.) You have great strength, not only physical, but moral. Only some little thing is lacking, but a most important one, which will come, I am sure. I shall be sorry in the next world if that will come after my death. Many grieve that fame comes to them when they are dead; I have no regrets on this score. I would forego not only much, but all, fame to have you in spiritual harmony with me in my lifetime, as you will be after my death.

(November 13.) You ask whether I still love you. My feelings toward you are such that I think they can never change, because there is in them everything that can bind people together. . . . No, not everything, either. There is lacking the outward agreement in convictions—I say “outward” because I think the disagreement is only external and am ever confident that it will disappear.

Well, it did not disappear, despite Tolstoy's persistent efforts, infinite patience, and extraordinary tact. But he clung to the hope to the very end, never seeming to realize the futility of his endeavors. The fact that she did not yearn for the consolations of his philosophy he always attributed more to his own tactlessness than to his wife's limitations. “I blame myself,” Tolstoy wrote her on one occasion, “for my inability to learn to use feelings rather than logic in my dealings with you.” And again: “I say that one cannot influence you—nor, indeed, women generally—by logic, which provokes you like some unlawful violence. Yet it is incorrect to say that we should not put reason above feelings and that we must, on the contrary, put feelings first.” But we have seen how, in his relations with his wife, Tolstoy always allowed his feelings freer scope than his reason. Even after the above-mentioned affirmations we still find him indulging his intense feelings in the tenderest expressions of sympathy, encouragement, and regret.

(November, 1898.) I cannot shake off an oppressive feeling of sadness, my dear, sweet Sonia, when I recall your tears on the morning of departure. I am quite sure that the good, godlike qualities of which you have so many will subdue everything that now oppresses and torments you—all that apathy and the feeling of life's emptiness of which you complain; and that you will yet live a joyous, positive, and tranquil life. My only anxiety is, how not to hinder you, for help you I cannot in any way, save by an increase of love for you, which I constantly feel of late.

(December 1.) I do but sit and worry over your physical and, especially, spiritual condition, and reproach myself. You say I wish to be in the right. On the contrary, I wish to be in the wrong, and feel in the wrong for not

managing so as not to grieve you. If you are suffering, and through me, then I must be to blame. I heartily repent this fault. If you were irritable and nervous, I am the more to blame for not putting myself in your place and feeling for you. I regret this now, but it is too late. . . . I write, and yet something holds me back. By misconstruing my words so as to be hurt by them you have scared me so that I am afraid to write. . . . Besides, what should I say? If, through misunderstanding and indisposition, I have unintentionally grieved you, please forgive me. I say "unintentionally," because I could not cause you pain deliberately, since, as I have written and told you, I lately feel greater and greater affection for you. Well, the sooner you answer the sooner I'll come, but, above all, you must not suffer as you do even when away. Suffering thus, you suffer not alone, for I suffer, too. I certainly cannot, *de gâté de cœur*, torture myself. Hence, if it does happen, it must be due to some misunderstanding.

I have reserved for the last two letters bearing on Tolstoy's final act in life—his flight from home. The first of these was written, but not delivered, to the Countess in 1897, thirteen years before the event it was intended to explain. The second, penned on the morning of Tolstoy's fatal departure, is the very last message she is known to have received from him.

(July 8, 1897.) Dear Sonia: The discord existing between my life and my convictions has long been tormenting me. I could not compel you to change your [mode of] life, the habits which I myself had fostered in you; nor could I leave you before now, fearing to deprive the children while young of what slight influence I might have over them and thus grieving you. But to continue living as I have lived these sixteen years—now wrangling with and irritating you, now myself yielding to the temptations of the environment to which I have grown accustomed—is equally impossible. Hence I have decided to do now what I have long wished to do: to go away; first because, with my rapidly advancing years, this [mode of] life becomes increasingly more trying for me, stimulating more and more my longing for solitude; and secondly, because, the children being grown up, my influence at home is no longer needed, while you all now have intenser interests that will make my absence little noticeable.

My leaving you does not indicate that I was displeased with you. I am aware that you *could not*—really could not and cannot—see [things] and feel as I do, and therefore could not and cannot change your [mode of] life and make sacrifices in the name of something you do not recognize. Therefore I do not blame you, but, on the contrary, gratefully and lovingly recall the long thirty-five years of our life [together]—especially the first half of that period, when you, with your innate motherly self-abnegation, so energetically and unflinchingly performed what you considered your duty. You have given to me and to the world all you could give; have given much motherly love and devotion; and for this one cannot fail to esteem you. But during the last period of our life—the last fifteen years—we were not in harmony. I cannot think myself in the wrong, for I know that I

changed, not for my sake or for the sake of others, but because I could not do otherwise.

I cannot blame you for not following me, but thank you and lovingly remember and will remember [you] for what you have given me. Good-by, dear Sonia.—Your loving Leo Tolstoy.

(November 10, 1910.) My going away grieves you. I am sorry, but understand and believe me that I cannot act differently. My position at home has become intolerable. Moreover, I cannot continue living in the state of ease in which I have been living; and I am now going to do what people of my advanced years commonly do: withdraw from the concerns of the world in order to spend the remaining years in peace and tranquillity.

Please understand me and, even should you know where I be, do not follow me. This course would only render your position and mine still worse, but would not shake my resolution.

I thank you for your forty-eight years of honest life with me and beg you to forgive me all my faults, as I, from the bottom of my heart, forgive you what faults you may have had. I advise you to reconcile yourself to the changed state of things caused by my departure and to feel no resentment toward me.

The most obvious thing to be said of these letters—it would be giving real meaning to a much-abused phrase to call them a human document—is that they afford another illustration of the fact that great men are apt to lead unhappy married lives. Their points of contact with the world at large are too few for them to find many in a particular individual. Hence, the greater the genius the greater the hazards of matrimony. Of course, the risks become chances when masculine and feminine greatness meet. Such happy coincidences are far too rare, however—probably because there is not enough greatness in the world to go round. Even when they do occur we have no guarantee of perfect and permanent marital fusion, since the influences tending to produce temperamental and other incompatibility do not become altogether inoperative with marriage. In other words, the most perfect matrimonial alliance may develop into an aggravated case of misalliance.

This is exactly what happened in the life of the Tolstoys, who were congenially mated, lived in perfect harmony for full twenty years, and then gradually drifted apart. How and why, we have seen. In view of the great gulf that developed between them—a gulf which only a Tolstoy could hope to bridge—the wonder is, not that the great Russian should have ultimately abandoned his home, but that he did not do it sooner. But even this is now accounted for by his heartfelt concern for his wife and family—especially his

wife, whose anxieties and tribulations were never off his mind. "For the sake of the truth," says a critic, "Tolstoy spares no one." I think he came very near making an exception in favor of his wife, or there would not have been so many interesting letters. In only a few of these does he touch upon the big questions which agitated him, and there, as we have seen, so timidly and apologetically that the Tolstoy who always fearlessly attacked even the most popular fallacies is hardly recognizable. In most instances he really avoided all discussion of principles. What anguish one must feel who loves his wife as did Tolstoy and yet cannot unburden his mind on the most momentous matters, the reader will have no difficulty in imagining. Such lifelong restraint would in itself have lent a tragic character to the Tolstoy romance.

In publishing these letters to the world Tolstoy's widow was prompted, as I have already stated, by the desire for self-vindication. Well, now that we have sampled the evidence, what are we to think of her case? While neither ready nor called upon to "hand down an opinion," I would say that the Countess has certainly created a strong presumption in her favor by the mere publication of these letters—by inviting her critics, as she does in her preface, "to judge from actual and authentic data, and not from conjectures and lies." Undoubtedly the impression would have been more favorable still had she not chosen to withhold from us the last few letters pertaining to Tolstoy's flight. But even from what we have before us, it is quite clear that she has borne her share of suffering in this great spiritual tragedy—and borne it well. It must have been no small task to have endured so long the eccentricities of genius, of which Tolstoy had an ample assortment. Under such tremendous difficulties, few women could have done better, if any so well.

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